



AMRITPAL SINGH (CENTER) PHOTOGRAPHED ON MARCH 3 WHILE PAYING RESPECT AT GOLDEN TEMPLE, THE HOLIEST SIKH SHRINE, IN PUNJAB, INDIA. PHOTO: NARINDER NANU / AFP

VICE News

India Cuts Off Internet to 27 Million People to Catch One Man

Uncertainty and anger spreads in the Indian state of Punjab after police launched a massive manhunt to catch Sikh political activist Amritpal Singh.



By Pallavi Pundir

JAKARTA, ID

22 March 2023, 8:29pm



Last month, hundreds of turbaned men gathered outside a police station in India's Punjab state, demanding the release of a man who they said was falsely arrested on kidnapping charges. They were led on by a

Minutes later, a violent clash broke out on Feb. 22. Police blamed the group for being armed and violent. The group said police charged at them with batons for protesting against the wrongful detention in a state that has a history of arbitrarily imprisoning Sikhs—a minority religious group in India. At the time, multiple protests were taking place around Punjab to release Sikh prisoners, some of whom have been political prisoners for over two decades.

By the end of it, police backtracked on the charges and released the accused man. The incident made national news, but it also put the spotlight on the man leading the group—Singh.

This week, state police and paramilitary forces put Punjab on edge as they swept through the whole state searching for Singh to arrest him. They said Singh is a “national security threat” and named the February incident as the reason for the crackdown.

News

Killing of Young Man in Nova Scotia Has Sikh Community on Edge

MANISHA KRISHNAN

09.10.21

ADVERTISEMENT

Authorities blocked internet access, placed restrictions on movement, stopped protests, suspended Twitter accounts and arrested over a hundred people, all in the span of four days.

Singh, in the meantime, is nowhere to be found.



PUNJAB POLICE MONITOR THE STREETS IN PUNJAB CITY MOHALI, WHERE PROTESTERS HAVE BEEN GATHERING THIS WEEK. PHOTO: RAVI KUMAR/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

“What’s happening now is a part of a larger process by the state to isolate and target Sikhs,” Parmjeet Singh Gazi, a lawyer in Punjab who runs local news network *Sikh Siyasat*, told VICE World News. “This atmosphere of fear and uncertainty in the last few days is not surprising to us at all. The

country's population. India has the largest concentration of Sikhs in the world, but the state of Punjab, which is the only Indian state with a Sikh-majority population at 16 million, has a history of persecution and violence that includes arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances linked to the state. The ongoing crisis, experts say, highlights the fissures between Sikhs and the Indian state.

As protests erupt in some parts of Punjab, many Twitter accounts of those posting about the situation on the ground, especially journalists, are getting suspended.

ADVERTISEMENT

“This atmosphere of fear and uncertainty in the last few days is not surprising to us at all. The [attempt to arrest Singh] is a part of a larger psychological warfare that goes back decades.”

“These measures are unsettling for many [Sikhs] given [the state’s] historical use to execute extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances,” he tweeted.

Gurratan Singh, a former member of Canada’s Provincial Parliament, tweeted, “Let the Indian Government know that we condemn this repression. The whole world is watching.”

Not much is known about Singh except that he was born and raised in India. He lived and worked in Dubai for a decade before returning to Punjab last year and announced himself the new chief of a young social organisation called Waris Punjab De, which translates to “The heirs of Punjab”.

From the start of his public life, Singh has made clear one big demand, that’s considered audacious, controversial and even criminal in India: Sikh separation from the rest of the country.

ADVERTISEMENT

“Whenever you try to rely on governments or their funding or depend on state structures, they control your fate, including your politics as a community,” he

News

the state.”

In another *Baaz News* interview from January, Singh said the surveillance on him is “unimaginable.” Most of his big social media accounts have been suspended since last year, although he’s still available on

Clubhouse and TikTok where his sessions about Sikh assertion and independence are still up.

India's Sikh Temples

AHMER KHAN

05.07.21

Singh’s political work is deeply intertwined with a larger Sikh separatist movement called the Khalistan movement, the seeds of which were sown much before the Indian subcontinent was freed from British colonial rule in 1947.

The Khalistan movement rose against the backdrop of pivotal political events in newly independent India, such the government refusing autonomy to Punjab on multiple occasions and having its river waters diverted to other states. The Khalistan movement gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s, until 1984, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi sent the Indian military into Golden Temple, the holiest shrine for Sikhs, and killed the movement’s top leadership.

ADVERTISEMENT



POLICE IN PUNJAB STATE, INDIA, FORCEFULLY REMOVE THE SUPPORTERS PROTESTING AGAINST THE POLICE ACTION AGAINST AMRITPAL SINGH, THE CHARISMATIC SIKH ACTIVIST. PHOTO BY SANJEEV SHARMA/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Soon after, Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, which was followed by an organised massacre that killed thousands of Sikhs.

But it didn't end there. Human rights reports document a sustained “campaign” to end the Khalistan movement, during which thousands of Sikhs were arrested and subjected to torture. Many reports document enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings too.

The 2011 Wikileaks cables reported that Gandhi's Indian National Congress party possibly had a hand in the 1984 massacre. In 2018, Congress leader Sajjan Kumar, was sentenced to life for their involvement.

Gazi, the lawyer and *Sikh Siyasat* editor, said that Singh's appeal among young Sikhs, is in the way he speaks about issues resulting from these tumultuous years, such as drug abuse and youth unemployment. “The Indian state might avoid resolving Sikhs’

News

**Here's Why
Sikh and
Hindu
Minorities are
Leaving
Afghanistan**

rehabilitation campaigns in Punjab. In a TV news interview, Singh said that he's been implicated in the February case because authorities don't want young people to follow him. "They want the Sikh youth to be drug addicts and not think about their people," he said. "They want us to live like slaves."

ADVERTISEMENT

"The Indian state might avoid resolving Sikhs' problems, but you can't suppress or erase them."

The Khalistan movement is banned in India, and the government and pro-nationalists interchangeably use "Khalistani" with "terrorists." Singh's open embrace of the term "Khalistani" and his wider cause has alarmed authorities. In February, India's Home Minister Amit Shah told the media they will not allow the Khalistan movement to thrive in Punjab, to which Singh responded that such suppression could lead to a repeat of history when Gandhi was assassinated. Indian media headlined his response as an open threat to Shah.

democratic right?”

This week, the Punjab police released dramatic details of Singh’s alleged escape: from a high-speed car chase, to claiming that Singh is hiding in disguise. So far, the Punjab police have arrested 154 of his associates. Singh and four others are charged under the draconian National Security Act (NSA), which gives overarching powers to the state to detain anyone.

ADVERTISEMENT

Punjab-based Jaspal Singh Manjhpur, a criminal lawyer whose work revolves around the unlawful detention of Sikhs, said the imposition of NSA is a political decision to bypass judicial processes.

“The NSA ensures that the case will go on for a long time,” he told VICE World News. “There’s clearly an attempt to create an environment of fear and not talk about what’s going on.”

There’s a lot of vagueness around Singh’s disappearance. On Saturday, one media outlet reported that he’s been detained, but Punjab police quickly clarified that he’s still at large.

Politics

There’s Good Reason to Be Optimistic About Jagmeet Singh

killing. Mann is the chief of Shiromani Akali Dal, a Sikh-centric political party, who came out in support of Singh and claimed he's being falsely implicated just because of the February incident.

ADVERTISEMENT

“There’s clearly an attempt to create an environment of fear and not talk about what’s going on.”

“If [Singh is killed], it will lead to a big issue worldwide among the Sikhs. And I, as a responsible MP, suggest to the government that [they] don’t do anything which results in his elimination,” Mann said. Mann’s Twitter account has since been suspended in India.



PROTESTERS HOLD A PHOTO OF AMRITPAL SINGH OUTSIDE THE INDIAN CONSULATE IN SAN FRANCISCO. PHOTO: NOAH BERGER/ AFP

Jaskaran Sandhu, a Toronto-based board member of the World Sikh Organization, told VICE World News the ongoing events are a sharp reminder of the past.

“We’ve historically seen the same tactic by the Punjab and Indian security forces play out,” he said. “The vagueness of details around Singh’s arrest point to the fact that either they’re setting a precursor for a fake [lethal police] encounter, or they already have him and are figuring out what to do.”

“The Sikh historical memory around these events makes us believe that Singh’s life is in danger.”

As of this week, Punjab police continue to crack down on protesters. Amandeep, an independent journalist from the state, whose Twitter account is also suspended, told VICE World News that the phones of some journalists have been seized. He requested anonymity due to fears for his security.

gave it autonomy—under complete communications blockade. The government claimed the move was accepted by the people, but some news outlets reported protests against it.

ADVERTISEMENT

“This shows that the state is censoring counter-narratives in order to push their own narrative that everything is fine,” said Amandeep.



role in what's going on now. The farmers' protests, which were led by Sikhs, were against Modi's farm laws that gave more power to big corporations and further disenfranchised farmers. Punjab is primarily an agrarian state, and many farmers from the state marched to the Delhi border in 2021. In November that year, Modi conceded and withdrew the laws.

A 2018 NGO study found that Punjab has the highest fear among the general public of police excesses due to events in the state over the last four decades.

"But the farm protests broke that fear and people saw eye to eye with the Indian state," said Amandeep. "Now the state is trying to reassert that fear in the Punjabi and Sikh psyche."

Gazi added that the situation is similar to the 1970s when "the state isolated, defamed and targeted them as a measure to contain their capacity and reputation." But this time, the people in Punjab aren't cowering, he added.

"This is psychological warfare," he said. "People here know things will and can get worse. There is anger, but not fear. It's nothing that the people haven't seen before."

Identity.

**Sikh
Americans In
the US Military
Are Still
Fighting to
Keep Their
Turbans and
Beards**

PALLAVI PUNDIR

10.18.21

Follow Pallavi Pundir on Twitter.

TAGGED: SIKHISM, INDIA, SEPERATISTS, WORLDNEWS, SOUTH ASIA, KHALISTAN, GENOCIDE

0
MORE

NEWS

2020: A Year Like No Other

VICE VIDEO

12.31.20

News

A Brief History of Non-Indians Hating On Indian Food

PALLAVI PUNDIR

10.09.20



ADVERTISEMENT

ABOUT

CAREERS

PARTNER

PRIVACY POLICY

TERMS OF USE



